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Author(s): Denise Fisher

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The Crowded and Complex Pacific: Lessons from France's Pacific Experience

Denise Fisher

The recent experience of France in the Pacific Islands provides some cautionary indicators for Australia about the potential effect of new players seeking engagement in the region, and the likely approaches of island leaders to them.

France is effectively the only remaining European power resident¹ in the Pacific islands through its sovereign territories, New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna and Clipperton Island. It sees itself both as a leading European power in the Pacific, and as an internal Pacific Islands regional power, based on its sovereignty there.² The French territories occupy strategic positions relative to the Pacific Island states: New Caledonia and French Polynesia flank the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) region at the western and eastern ends respectively, with Wallis and Futuna at the centre. France's uninhabited Clipperton Island lies north of the Equator just off the Mexican coast. Of the four, New Caledonia is undoubtedly France's pre-eminent possession, site of its regional military headquarters and with strategic minerals (nickel, lithium, cobalt) and signs of petroleum and gas offshore. France has recognised in a series of recent assessments that its Pacific possessions represent strategic assets, making it the world's number two maritime power (in terms of maritime territory at least) by virtue of their vast exclusive economic zones, and underpinning France's claims to global leadership, and its scientific and technical, space and military roles.³

Until relatively recently, France was seen by island states as a disruptive regional influence, single-mindedly pursuing its own national objectives. Indeed, reactions to France's approach to nuclear testing and decolonisation demands in the Pacific have long been an important factor in the development of regional architecture and consciousness.

1 The United Kingdom retains a small presence in Pitcairn Island which has only forty-five residents and is run from its diplomatic mission in New Zealand.

2 See Denise Fisher, 'France, the EU and the South Pacific', *Briefing Paper*, Centre for European Studies, Australian National University, vol. 3, no. 9 (August 2019), <politicsir.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2012-9_France-the-EU-and-the-South-Pacific_0.pdf> [Accessed 23 September 2019]; and Denise Fisher, 'France: "In", "Of" or "From" the South Pacific Region?' *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, 2012-2, no. 135 (2012), pp. 185-99.

3 French assessments include the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs internal White Paper, '2030 French Strategy in Asia-Oceania', August 2018; Ministry of Defence, *Revue stratégique de défense et de sécurité nationale*, 14 October 2017, p. 27; Ministry of Defence, *Le Livre blanc sur la défense et la sécurité nationale*, 29 April 2013; Foreign and European Affairs Ministry, *La France en Asie-Océanie: enjeux stratégiques et politiques*, August 2011; Economic Social and Environment Council, 'L'extension du plateau continental au-delà des 200 milles marins: un atout pour la France', *Journaux officiels*, October 2013; and three Senate reports: 'La maritimisation', *Rapport d'information*, no. 674, 17 July 2012; 'Colloque La France dans le Pacifique: quelle vision pour le 21e siècle?', *Rapport d'information* no 293, 25 January 2013; 'ZEEs maritimes: Moment de la vérité', *Rapport d'information* no 430, 9 April 2014.

As early as the 1960s, France ruled out discussion of these policies in the Noumea-based South Pacific Commission, now the Secretariat for the Pacific Community (SPC).⁴ In response, in 1971 island leaders established the South Pacific Forum (now the Pacific Islands Forum), a grouping which quickly became the region's pre-eminent political and security grouping. Similarly, Kanak independence demands in New Caledonia were the critical spur to the establishment of the Melanesian Spearhead Group in the 1980s.

In 1986, a concerted diplomatic campaign by members of the Forum secured the relisting of New Caledonia as a non-self-governing territory with the UN Decolonisation Committee, over France's bitter objections and accusations of interference in its internal affairs. France had removed its territories from UN purview in 1947. Relisting of New Caledonia with unanimous UN support showed that the world was watching France's policies there. The UN has passed a resolution on self-determination in New Caledonia every year since then.

By 1988, in the wake of UN attention, and after years of civil disturbance and a deadly showdown in New Caledonia between Kanak independence militants and French police, France had negotiated agreements beginning what was to be a thirty-year peaceful process of preparation for a vote on independence by 2018. The Matignon and Oudinot Accords were concluded in 1988, providing for an independence referendum within ten years. Concerns about a return to violence led all parties to sign the Noumea Accord in 1998, extending the date of a referendum by a further twenty years, to 2018. Responding to independence leaders' pressure, France also agreed finally to accept a UN role, and thereafter began reporting to the UN as the territory's administrator.

Pacific Island countries also led a long and ultimately successful international campaign, including in the United Nations, against French nuclear testing in French Polynesia. France bitterly opposed this campaign, including by bombing a Greenpeace protest vessel in Auckland Harbour in 1985. But island countries persisted and by 1996, succumbing to regional and international pressure, France had ceased testing there.⁵

In more recent years France has sought to improve its image in the region. Under the 1992 FRANZ Arrangement with Australia and New Zealand, it delivers disaster relief and fisheries surveillance. France participates regularly in defence exercises with Australia and New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Vanuatu and Tonga. It funds a modest aid program primarily through the SPC and associated organisations. In 2003 it set up triennial Oceanic Summits which focus largely on sustainable development and environment-related issues.

France has enjoyed considerable success in securing acceptance by regional countries. Its three territories participate widely in the SPC and various technical bodies as members, associate members or observers. The PIF's approach to membership by the French territories has evolved. Observer status, reserved for entities on the way to self-government, was given to New Caledonia in 1999 (after the signing of the Noumea Accord) and French Polynesia in 2004 (after a statutory measure that year,

4 See Denise Fisher, *France in the South Pacific: Power and Politics* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2013), p. 51; Stephen Bates, *The South Pacific Island Countries and France: A Study in Inter-State Relations* (Canberra: Dept. of International Relations, Australian National University, 1990), pp. 41-46; Greg Fry, 'Regionalism and International Politics of the South Pacific', *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 54, no. 3 (1981), pp. 462, 464.

5 See Stephen Henningham, *France and the South Pacific: A Contemporary History* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1992), pp. 172-77; Nic Maclellan and Jean Chesneaux, *After Moruroa: France in the South Pacific* (Melbourne and New York: Ocean Press, 1998); and Fisher, *France in the South Pacific*, pp. 83-84.

endowing some autonomies). After much lobbying by France for its territories' membership, the Forum created a new status of Associate member for both in 2006, when it also admitted Wallis and Futuna as an observer. Finally, in 2016, PIF leaders invited French Polynesia and New Caledonia, the two largest French territories, into its inner sanctum as full members, effectively admitting two French voices into its discussions—including on security matters. While it remains unclear why Forum leaders took this step when agreements such as the Noumea Accord had yet to play out fully, private communications with this author suggest that it was controversial, with dissenting voices during discussion, and highly political. One analyst has pointed to French pressure and discussions about potentially lucrative investment, for example in Papua New Guinea.⁶

With its increased regional participation founded on its territorial sovereignty, France is now facing challenges to that sovereignty arising from a self-determination process in New Caledonia in the final phase of the Noumea Accord, which will inevitably alter the nature of its role there, with potential spin-offs in its other territories. French Polynesian independence leader Oscar Temaru has already called for a similar referendum process there.⁷ As indicated, the referendum process in New Caledonia is the last step in the peace accords which ended civil war over independence in the 1980s and which have guaranteed three decades of predictability and peace. On 4 November 2018, the first referendum was held, of a possible three votes on independence by 2022. Regional island countries continue to take a close interest, and help drive UN involvement, based on solidarity with the indigenous and islander people in these territories. PIF ministerial missions visited New Caledonia to examine implementation of Noumea Accord commitments in 1999, 2001 and 2004, forwarding their reports to the UN. The PIF observed the November 2018 independence referendum and the 2019 local elections. At the urging of Kanak independence leaders supported by the MSG over many years, and at French invitation, the UN has overseen various aspects of preparation for the referendum and observed voting on the day itself.

As identified in its strategic assessments, the stakes for France are high, and the outcome of the process by no means assured. The November 2018 referendum results revealed deep ethnic division. Under intricate eligibility requirements, all of the 39 per cent of the population who are indigenous are eligible to vote in the independence referendums, but not all of the 27 per cent of the population who are European are eligible. While 57 per cent of voters supported staying with France, the 43 per cent supporting independence were overwhelmingly indigenous Kanak people. This was a surprise to many pro-France supporters who had expected significant support by some Kanaks for staying with France after thirty years of economic transfers and redistribution of nickel-based operations and revenue. Kanak support for independence was so striking that an overlay of the 'yes' vote over a demographic map of Kanak areas coincides exactly.

The broader Pacific Island context was also important. Independence leaders in their campaign targeted other Pacific islanders in the population, including the around 8 per cent Wallisians, most of whom had emigrated from Wallis and Futuna under favourable

6 Nic Maclellan, 'France and the Forum', *Inside Story*, 13 October 2016, <insidestory.org.au/france-and-the-forum/> [Accessed 22 September 2019].

7 Temaru's party Tavini Huiraàtira communique, "'Un désaveu cinglant pour la France coloniale" selon le Tavini', *actu.fr*, 4 November 2018, <www.ladepeche.pf/desaveu-cinglant-france-coloniale-selon-tavini/> [Accessed 20 September 2019].

employment provisions, and a further 3 per cent from other islands (French Polynesia and Vanuatu), many of whom are eligible to vote in the referendums. Significantly, independence leaders sought, and received, support from clan leaders in neighbouring island countries and from the Melanesian Spearhead Group. Moreover, since the referendum, local elections in May 2019, expected to be the last under the peace accords, saw an increase in the independence groups' representation in the local congress at the expense of the majority loyalist coalition, which has become more hard-line, and the emergence of a new ethnic Wallisian based party playing a power-broking role. The fact of a Wallisian party holding the balance of power is complicated by a history of ethnic tension and violence between Wallisians and Kanaks.

This current situation of heightened ethnic division and consequent loyalist fear does not bode well for the sensitive and protracted process ahead: because the answer to the first referendum was 'no' to independence, under the Noumea Accord a second vote may be held by November 2020 and, in the same circumstances, a third by November 2022. Thereafter discussions must be held to address the situation, likely to redefine governance for the future. Therefore New Caledonia will either become independent if voters support independence, or, even in the more likely result that voters won't vote that way, will be reconsidering its existing governance and autonomies, impacting on France's status and with knock-on effects on its other regional territories. France is urging the beginning of these important discussions as soon as possible, rather than waiting for 2022. Because of the size of the indigenous Kanak population and the fact that they are not, unlike European or other residents, likely to leave, no long-term plan can be viable without considering their position, as expressed at least in November 2018, in favour of independence. And island regional neighbours are watching.

The Pacific Islands' success in their international campaign pressuring France to change its activities there shows that, just as any long-term stable future for New Caledonia requires consideration of the indigenous Kanak pro-independence position, so any long-term future for France in the region requires ongoing support by island countries. This support cannot be assumed. Only in 2013, three PIF island countries (Nauru, Tuvalu and Solomon Islands) sponsored the successful relisting of French Polynesia as a non-self-governing territory with the UN Decolonisation Committee against France's outspoken and bitter opposition, a replay of the islands' 1986 success in relisting New Caledonia. While the timing and immediate success of the passage of this unanimous UN General Assembly resolution were a surprise, including to Australia and New Zealand, the resolution was the result of extensive regional lobbying by French Polynesian independence leader Oscar Temaru over many years. The fact that some PIF members sponsored the relisting resolution, over profound French opposition, underlines that the Forum is not united in its recent more forthcoming treatment of France.

France's more constructive regional role has recently been seen as an asset by western interests (the United States, Australia and New Zealand), not least because it has involved direct defence and other cooperation, for example through the FRANZ, and has worked within existing regional architecture (the SPC, the associated technical bodies, the PIF) initiated by Australia and New Zealand in concert with island governments. But as the regional experience with France has shown, it can only continue on the terms of the regional island governments. With an ever-increasing number of new partners seeking relationships in the Pacific, PIF Secretary General Dame Meg Taylor in February 2019

signalled that members generally want to be “friends to all” and are prepared to leverage competing offers for their own benefit.⁸ However, their capacities to do so are being constrained for many reasons.

First, the sheer size and weight of the increased presence of China in recent years has imposed constraints on island governments. China comes to the region with its own political conditions which differ to those of western partners. These include requiring support for the one-China policy, concessional loans, using China’s contractors and labour, and much procurement from China, and making approved tourism status conditional on cooperation. China also prefers working via bilateral relations rather than through regional bodies.⁹

Second, the adjustment of traditional partners to the new presence of China has increased the complexity of island governments’ interactions with them. The United States announced an initial pivot to the Asia-Pacific, stepping up the level of its delegations to regional meetings and modestly increasing its diplomatic and aid presence, while effectively continuing to leave western leadership in the islands region to Australia and New Zealand. The Obama administration took up the idea of a broader ‘Indo-Pacific’ vision from 2010. The Trump administration has advanced this concept, while tending to focus on bilateral commercial links, with aid taking a firm second place: a challenge for a region like the Pacific Islands dependent on foreign aid.¹⁰ Taiwan continued its competition with China for political recognition, and, after China convened a Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum summit in April 2006, established a regular regional summit of its own, the Taiwan Pacific Allies Summit just months later. Japan increased its aid and commitment to its Summit-level discussions, and sought closer engagement with the United States against the China bulwark.¹¹ Australia and New Zealand both tightened their strategic relationship with France, based on regional defence cooperation in the Pacific Islands, Australia signing an Enhanced Partnership agreement in 2012, strengthened in 2017, and New Zealand a Joint Declaration with France in 2018. Australia, too, has subscribed to the ‘Indo-Pacific’ concept from 2013, if somewhat fuzzily,¹² while keeping the Pacific islands region as a priority. Prime Minister Morrison announced a refreshed Pacific Islands approach, heavily based on security issues, in November 2018.¹³

8 Dame Meg Taylor, Keynote Address to ‘The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands’, University of the South Pacific, Port Vila, Vanuatu, 8 February 2019, <www.forumsec.org/keynote-address-by-dame-meg-taylor-secretary-general-the-china-alternative-changing-regional-order-in-the-pacific-islands/> [Accessed 26 June 2019].

9 This and the succeeding two paragraphs draw from Denise Fisher, ‘One among Many: Changing Geostrategic Interests and Challenges for France in the South Pacific’, *Les Études du CERi*, no. 216 (Paris: Centre des recherches internationales, Sciences-po, December 2015), <www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/en/content/one-among-many-changing-geostrategic-interests-and-challenges-france-south-pacific> [Accessed 22 September 2019].

10 See for example David Scott, ‘The Indo-Pacific in US Strategy: Responding to Power Shifts’, *Rising Powers Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2018), pp. 19–43.

11 For elaboration, see Fisher, ‘One among Many’, p. 24.

12 See Denise Fisher, ‘Australia Needs Indo-Pacific Clarity’, *Policy Forum*, Asia and the Pacific Policy Society, 3 July 2018, <www.policyforum.net/australia-needs-indo-pacific-clarity/> [Accessed 22 September 2019].

13 Scott Morrison, ‘Australia and the Pacific: A New Chapter’, Speech at Lavarack Barracks, Townsville, Qld, 8 November 2018, <www.pm.gov.au/media/address-australia-and-pacific-new-chapter> [Accessed 26 June 2019].

As for France, apart from pursuing its modest cooperation activities, with France's claims to a global leadership role uppermost in mind, President Macron has articulated his own version of an 'Indo-Pacific' vision. Visiting Canberra in early 2018, he referred to a Paris-New Delhi-Canberra axis. But in his subsequent visit to New Caledonia lobbying for voters to support staying with France in the November 2018 referendum, he extended the arc from Paris right through to New Caledonia, provided it remains French. In Noumea, he framed his vision as squarely aimed at a "hegemonic" China, rhetoric enthusiastically taken up by pro-France parties in New Caledonia.¹⁴ In this, Macron has posed a binary choice (the West v. China) for regional nations when many, including Australia, might prefer not to have to make such a choice.

All of these repositionings and activities have heightened the complexity of demands on regional island countries.

At the same time that traditional players renewed their regional interests, there has been an influx of numerous relatively new players (such as India, Russia and even the UAE) pursuing a range of diverse and sometimes arcane objectives. These include Russia seeking island votes in the UN for recognition of Abkhazia and Ossetia, and the UAE lobbying for support to be the headquarters of the International Renewable Energy Agency. Such activity has put pressure on local governments' capacities. PIF countries, in addition to maintaining eighteen dialogue partner relationships, now participate in separate regular summits with China, Taiwan, Japan, France and India. Some of the bigger partners, such as the EU led by France, and China, have set new markers for collaboration, often bilaterally, rather than through regional institutions.

PIF countries have also changed their patterns of inter-island cooperation, working increasingly with other small island states around the globe in forums such as the Alliance of Small Island States and the Pacific Small Islands Developing States on priorities such as sustainable development and climate change. Regionally some have developed new forums excluding some of the traditional regional larger governments (Australia and New Zealand), such as the Pacific Islands Development Forum, and the Polynesian Leaders Group.

France's regional engagement itself presents challenges for the island governments, and for traditional partners Australia and New Zealand in their efforts to lead western interests in the region. For example, when asked about the effect on PIF capacity to discuss and decide sensitive security questions such as collective security responses and implementing the Boe Declaration, now that the Forum includes two French voices, senior regional figures privately reply that measures will be found to circumvent this problem, including one suggestion that the real discussion between island leaders on these issues will take place outside of the Forum.¹⁵ This should be of concern to Australia and New Zealand, who have worked for the existing Forum security dispositions.

14 Emmanuel Macron, Discours du Président de la République à Nouméa, 5 May 2018, <www.voltairenet.org/article201080.html> [Accessed 26 June 2019].

15 Expressed publicly by Solomon Islands' Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs and External Trade, Collin Beck, in response to a question at the 'Pacific in the Indo Pacific' conference, Australian National University, Canberra, 7 June 2019.

The experience of island countries' treatment of France in recent decades shows that they can and will wield their capacity to unite, and to attract international support, against a player viewed as troublesome, when their interests are at stake, with or without 'non-island' Forum partners Australia and New Zealand. They will use strategic alliances within multilateral bodies and new bilateral relationships to do so, and they will reorganise regional architecture if necessary, as they have in the past.

Australia and New Zealand, like France and the United States, have to work harder to exert influence and secure cooperation in the region. Like any of the other players, Australia has its own unique strategic interests, and needs to be clear-minded about these and about pursuing them. Part of clarifying its interests will be acknowledging that France's interests are not always identical with its own, given France's primary focus on its claims to global leadership and presence. The forthcoming playing-out of the decolonisation process in New Caledonia may put these varying interests to the test.

Denise Fisher is Europa Visiting Fellow at the Australian National University Centre for European Studies and writes on France and the Pacific region. A former senior diplomat, she has extensive Indo-Pacific experience having served as Australia's Consul-General in Noumea and as High Commissioner in Zimbabwe, also accredited to Angola, Mozambique, Zambia and Malawi, as well as in Australia's missions in Washington, Kuala Lumpur, New Delhi, Nairobi and Myanmar.